

San Mateo County Times

Feds must heed 'wake-up call'

Wednesday, August 04, 2004 - SOMETIMES we are our own worst enemy.

Despite the fact that the United States is in the throes of a full-fledged war against terrorists – both at home and abroad – federal authorities say existing regulations limit their ability to oversee caches of explosives held by local law enforcement departments or FBI field offices.

This runs completely contrary to every effort by the Department of Homeland Security to counter terrorist threats at home.

Just last month, about 200 pounds of C4 explosives and other paraphernalia such as blasting caps and primer cord were stolen from reinforced storage sheds near Crystal Springs Reservoir.

Four men have been arrested and the explosives recovered, but in the words of Congressman Tom Lantos, D-San Mateo, this should be the "national wake-up call" that helps us prevent more dire lapses in security.

On Monday, U.S. authorities told members of the House subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations that they didn't know exactly how many caches of explosives exist nationwide. That shortfall of information limits the federal government's ability to secure those weapons and stockpiles.

We've got a long way to go to safeguard our own weapons from being used against us, particularly given that a pair of bolt-cutters and a blowtorch was all that stood between us and the thieves who broke open the San Mateo bunker.

We applaud the recent creation of a new database to help monitor the storage of private stockpiles of explosives, but that falls far short of what is needed to mitigate the threat of these ubiquitous weapons.

More must be done to ensure that stockpiled weapons meant for our security do not fall into the wrong hands.

Now is the time for greater regulations and restrictions to be imposed, regulations that will afford federal authorities the jurisdiction and freedom to inspect local public facilities that house explosives.

Further, a uniform storage and security code must be imposed to ensure a minimum standard with regular monitoring and assurances that the weapons are still secure.

Imagine if federal aviation authorities had had the luxury of hindsight on their side; if only they knew that an enemy was lurking within our midst. Perhaps then they would have had reason to do something about an apprentice pilot who wanted only to learn how to fly a plane on a level path. The fact that he had no interest in takeoffs or landings is the obvious "wake-up call" we missed then.

We must not let that same inability to connect the dots manifest into another opportunity for our enemies to attack us from within.